

Christmas Day

Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
Saint Paul, Minnesota
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This passage from John's Gospel comes around each year on this day. Sometimes it's called the Prolog, as though it were somehow distinct from the rest of the gospel (even though it's not) ... as if it had little to do with the rest of it (when it actually has everything to do with it). Anyway, it comes around every year at this time ... much like Auld Lang Syne will come around at the end of the week, as it does every year. And perhaps, like Auld Lang Syne, we know some of the words of this passage; it's vaguely familiar; we aren't quite sure what it's all about, but it seems appropriate to the moment ... so we go along with it.

If you actually do know the words to Auld Lang Syne, then you also know that we modern Americans need help to unpack the thick Scottish dialect in which it was written because it is as impenetrable to us as Shakespeare's writings are in his original English. The thought occurs that perhaps this familiar, yet strange, passage also might need some similar unpacking for us as modern Americans in this day. And one of the things we send pastors to seminary for is to learn how to unpack this stuff, right? So here goes ...

Let's start with a more roughed up, less familiar reading of what we just heard and then, perhaps, we might see how disturbing, disruptive, and even dangerous the Christmas story really is.

In the beginning, the Word was being and the Word was being oriented toward God and God was being the Word. This was in the beginning with reference to God. Every thing became through this Word, and apart from this Word, no thing happened. In this Word was life and the life was the light of human beings. And so the Light is shining in the darkness and the darkness did not get it – it did not grasp or comprehend or apprehend the Light.

A few lines in and we're running into a major translation problem. In Greek, *word* and *light* are considered masculine nouns because they take the endings and pronouns associated with masculinity. However, in English, we don't typically use gendered pronouns in relation to things that don't have physical attributes of gender. But we also know that the terms *Word* and *Light* are being used in reference to Jesus, so going with the neutral pronoun at this point feels a little awkward. But let's just try to roll with it ...

It came to pass that there was a human being who had been sent as a messenger from God; his name was John. This one came to witness in order that he would testify concerning the light so that all might believe on account of him. This one was not the light but was to give testimony about the light.

This was being the true light; it is giving light to all human beings by coming into the cosmos, the whole of creation. It was in the cosmos, and also the cosmos came into existence through it, and yet the cosmos knew it not. It came to what was its own and its own received it not. But as many as received it, this light gave power ... ability ... privilege to become children

of God; they will believe in its name. These children were born not out of blood or of the inclination of flesh or of the will of men, but from God they were born.

And so the Word came to be flesh and it encamped among us, pitched his tent in our midst, and we saw with our eyes his glory as unique, one and only begotten from the father full of grace and truth.

Well, the language at least might be a little disruptive – if for no other reason than it is not what we're accustomed to. But as C. S. Lewis once observed, when the author steps on to the stage, the play is over ... and here we have the author, the creative word that spoke all of creation into existence, stepping into that creation. That could be the end of everything, but there is one exception to Lewis' observation: the author of a play can step (and on many occasions has stepped) onto the stage and the play can still continue – if the author steps onto the stage as a character in the play.

So this creative Word stepped into creation without bringing the whole thing crashing down because the Word became one of us, a human being, taking up residence in our midst. But that might be a little too close for comfort. Remember, this Word has the power to speak creation itself into existence. Yet, it has come among us as one of us. Now what?

Even though the Word that authored creation has stepped into creation as a player in the unfolding human drama, there is still danger. We could get it wrong. This Word came to those that were his own, came home (as it were) to people who should have recognized him and received him as we welcome family and dear friends into our homes during this holiday season. Yet that didn't happen.

Before looking around to imagine whom the gospel writer might be referring to, let's ponder this question: If this Word were coming into our world today, which, after all, is what we're celebrating at Christmas – the coming of God in our midst, who are the people who would be Christ's home, who would be the natural, expected people to receive this Word made flesh? Hint: it's us. We're the ones who should be expected to recognize what God is up to in this – and so we're the ones who could get it wrong.

We try to avoid noticing this. John the Baptizer is mentioned in our gospel today and we've heard a fair bit from John in recent weeks. There isn't a Christmas story, an account of the birth of Jesus in every gospel, but John the Baptizer appears in all four. Although he doesn't utter those words in this particular gospel, John's best known line, his catch-phrase, is ... you brood of vipers. Of course, John doesn't direct this at anyone and everyone; it's just for the Pharisees. We like to imagine the Pharisees as the bad guys, the villains of the story, but they aren't. They're actually very good people – or at least trying to be. They were trying, in all their doings, to do life as God desired ... which is why John questioned them so harshly. If they were already oriented toward God, already trying to do what God wanted, then why would they be feeling a need to repent, to totally change their lives in thinking and feeling and being? Why would we?

We have met the Pharisees and they are us. This is the danger in our gospel today: We could get this wrong. We could be so focused on what we think God wants, so sure that God wills as we

will, that we miss what God is doing, breaking into our world. That is a risk God is, apparently, quite willing to take. God is willing to be misunderstood, rejected.

So the Word comes into the world anyway, doing what it does. That's all on God. God will do as God wills. Our response or reaction to what God is doing won't change that one way or the other. God's activity does not depend on human response or lack thereof. But God is willing to take a chance with us.

We could get it wrong, yes. However, we could also get it at least right enough to receive what God is doing like a gift. Receive, in this case, isn't the classic evangelical "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal savior?" ... considering the costs and benefits and making a considered, conscious decision. To receive, in this case, is to take to one's self. It's kind of like the way we receive gifts later today ... or maybe you did earlier or last night or whatever. When you're given a gift, what do you do? You open it up! You take it into a kind of embrace. It becomes yours. The gift of God is here. The Light has come. It's unwrapped here in our midst. Do you take it as your own?

But beware! This gift, this Light can change you. This gift confers the power, the ability to become a child of God ... which is to say, it changes your identity. It will change who you are and how you understand yourself and your place in the world.

Maybe that's why the nostalgia of Christmas focuses on the Eve service not the Day. In fact, a number of churches cancel Sunday morning services in years such as this one when Christmas Day happens to fall on a Sunday. And some that didn't cancel at least gave it serious consideration. If we make the Eve the main event, then everything is swathed in candlelight. It's quiet. It's gentle. It's sweet. The angels are singing. The stars are shining. The shepherds and their sheep listen as Mary sings her lullaby to her newborn. Jesus lays in his manger bed and sleeps. It's safe, cozy, contained.

But in the brighter light of day, it all looks different. We see what a squalid place a stable is for a birth. We see the poverty of the parents God chose (and unlike us, God was able to choose!). God's light is loose in the world, rewriting scripts and doing – literally – God-knows-what. We might prefer something a little safer, a little prettier, a little nicer. However, these are also signs that nothing is too dark, too awful, too plain, too insignificant for God. The light shines brightest in the darkness and that darkness ain't never gonna get that Light – no matter what.

The light shines in the darkness and nothing can overcome it. Nothing in the world. Nothing in other people or groups or actors out there in the world and nothing in us. Nothing can stop this light, prevent its coming, eclipse its shining, or change it. The Light shall have its way and God's will shall indeed be done in the end.

The real heart of the Christmas message is what we celebrate this morning: God has broken into this world and nothing can ever be the same ... not you, not me, not any of us. God has come to dwell with us, literally pitched God's tent among ours ... or you might say cast God's light in with ours. God has come among us and given us a gift, a gift of promise and purpose, to join with God in shining this Light into the world around us.

That's your Christmas gift. Thanks be to God. Amen.